THE WAR ON GERMAN SUBMARINES.

SIR EDWARD CARSON

ON THE

BRITISH NAVY'S SUCCESS.

T. FISHER UNWIN, Ltd.,
1. ADELPHI TERRACE, LONDON.
1917.

PRICE ONE PENNY.

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Sir Edward Carson on the British Navy's Success.

WHAT has the British Navy done in eighteen days to meet the intensified policy of German "frightfulness," both against the Allies and against neutrals, as practised by her submarines? Sir Edward Carson, First Lord of the Admiralty, introducing the Navy Estimates in the House of Commons on February 21, devoted the greater part of his speech to answering this question.

"My duty," he declared, "is to tell the House and the country the whole extent of the menace." He did not disguise its character:

> *"It is grave. It is serious. It has not yet been solved. I can honestly say that we have never for a moment ceased to work at it in the Admiralty. But no single magic remedy exists, or probably will exist. Nevertheless, I am confident that in the development of measures which have been and are being devised its seriousness will by degrees be greatly mitigated."*

AN ANTI-SUBMARINE DEPARTMENT.

He told the House what had been done by way of organisation. "We have established at the Admiralty an Anti-Submarine Department, composed of the best and most experienced men we could draw for that purpose from men serving at sea. Their whole time is devoted to working out the problem. I have had their reports brought before the Board, and the Board take full responsibility for the approval of their methods and suggestions. Shortly after Sir John Jellicoe came to the Admiralty he issued an invitation to every member of the Fleet to send in any suggestion that occurred to him for dealing with this difficulty. We have, in addition to the Anti-Submarine Department, the Board of Inventions and Research. It is presided over by Admiral Lord Fisher, and associated with him are the greatest scientists the country possesses. He is there to tell them the wants of the Admiralty, and they are there to work out the methods by which those wants can be met—men like Sir J. Thomson, Sir Charles Parsons, Sir G. Beilby, and many associated with them of equal distinction. These are some of the greatest men we have. They give us of their best freely, and, as far as I am concerned, I cannot for a moment imagine that a great and distinguished public servant, who has done so much in the past as Lord Fisher has done, is not also giving to the Admiralty ungrudgingly the whole of his abilities and the whole of his services in trying to solve a problem of this kind, which threatens the very existence of this country.

ARMING OF MERCHANT SHIPS.

"One matter has greatly helped us," went on Sir Edward. He referred to the law affecting the arming of merchant ships.

The proposition had never been denied by either the belligerents, our enemies, or by the great neutral countries, as to the right of every merchant ship to arm itself for defensive, as contrasted with offensive, purposes. He had been greatly interested in observing the effect of the arming of merchant ships.

In the last two months the number of armed merchant ships had increased by 47·5 per cent. He did not know that that conveyed the amount of work involved. "We had, in the first place, to get guns in competition with the Army. We had to get the mountings, and, above all, we had to get the gun ratings. All I can say is that that increase in the arming of the merchant ships is going on better and better each week.

> "*When I tell the House the percentages, so far as I can gather, of the number of armed merchantmen and unarmed merchantmen that escaped the submarine menace, they will see how right we were to throw our whole force and power into carrying out this arming. As far as I can gather, of armed merchantmen that escape there are about seventy per cent. or seventy-five per cent., and of unarmed merchantmen twenty-four per cent. Therefore you will see how important is every gun you get and every ship you arm.*"

The First Lord proceeded: "We have made great preparations, and I would like, in passing, to say that the French have helped us considerably in this matter. There was some question at one time that some of the neutrals raised—as to whether our ships had a right to enter their ports armed. I must state that that has all been practically got over, and I do not believe that any international lawyer—and although the Germans have abandoned international law, the neutrals have not—will controvert the proposition which I stated in this House as to the right of a merchantman to arm itself against offence. I am stating that about the arming of merchant ships, and the effect it produces, not to minimise the difficulties or minimise the extent of the danger in which we are placed."

As to the progress of British losses, Sir Edward pointed out that their real significance could only be realised by comparing them with the volume of our shipping. He then compared, first, the total of British, Allied, and neutral shipping, taking the first eighteen days of each of the months of December, January, and February, with a view to showing the extent to which the so-called blockade by Germany has increased those losses. The figures given were those of merchant vessels over 100 tons net lost through submarines and mines, excluding fishing vessels. Fishing vessels were excluded because they are not brought in in a comparison with the amount of our trade entered and cleared every day in the various ports of the realm. After giving details of losses, he gave the totals.

"The totals of the items I have given for December were 113 vessels, amounting to 223,322 tons; for January, ninety-one vessels, amounting to 198,233 tons; for the first eighteen days of February, 134 vessels, amounting to 304,596 tons." These figures included the whole of December and January and the

first eighteen days of February. What were those losses out of, and what was the volume of the trade? Here is the answer:

12,000 SHIPS IN AND OUT IN EIGHTEEN DAYS.

"From the 1st to the 18th February—I am talking now of the daily number of vessels over 100 tons net, arriving and sailing into United Kingdom ports, exclusive of fishing craft or sailing vessels, and exclusive of estuarial traffic—for the first eighteen days of February we had arrivals in port of 607 ships, and we had clearances for the same eighteen days of 5,873 ships.

> "*That together shows an enormous amount of shipping which still goes on notwithstanding the German blockade. You may take it from me, and it may be another figure interesting to the House for future consideration, and whatever may arise in reference to this question, that the estimated number of ships in the danger zone at any one time—I mean the danger zone at home—is about* 3,000."

The losses, Sir Edward admitted, were bad enough and they were dangerous enough, but they were not equal to "the blatant and extravagant bravado of the German accounts." He quoted an intercepted message to New York, taken from the *Deutsche Tageszeitung*, giving a great account of the actions of their submarines: "They are taking into account that at first the increase in sinkings will not be so very great as they would wish, for submarine scare has been thrown into the English with paralysing effect, and the whole sea was as if swept clean at one blow." Sir Edward commented on this: "Twelve thousand ships in and out in eighteen days does not look anything like a paralysing effect or a sweeping of the seas. Then they go on and say this: 'It caused us nearly joy that English government has seen itself necessitated to forbid publication of ships' losses.' There is not a particle of truth in that statement and, so far as I am concerned, I would never be a party to holding back from my fellow-countrymen the losses which I believe, so far from making them shrink from the conflict, will put into them the spirit and determination that will eventually drive back these German vessels."

Some people might criticise his action in giving all these details. Perhaps people would say, "Are you not letting the Germans know how far they have been successful?" Not at all. "I am letting the neutrals know the truth, and in my opinion the greatest asset that this country possesses is the unconquerable courage of our race.

> "*In face of all these sinkings, with their accompanying sacrifices and trials—and God knows it is wearying work to read of the boats with frozen corpses that are brought in which have been submarined without notice by a nation that said they would not shrink from sinking our hospital ships and drowning our wounded—that is all bad enough, but I am encouraged by the fact that I have not yet heard of one sailor who has refused to sail. That is what is going to win the*

War, and however neutrals may have been nervous and frightened, you will see our example spread, and you will see as days go on that the neutrals will resume their sailings."

SHIPS THAT ESCAPE.

He proposed to make a change in the method of publishing our losses. "Nothing can be worse than inaccurate recording of these losses. I take up a paper and I see 'Twenty-four ships sunk,' or something of that kind, in a big headline. When you come to examine that with the real knowledge of the facts you know that these are accumulations coming in for many days. When you read down the list probably you recognise by the names of them some are fishing boats or trawlers; not that I am minimising the loss of fishing boats or trawlers, but when you read it you get no comparison with the actual volume of the trade that is being done. I propose, therefore, to publish—I am not sure that I shall be able to do it every day, but as nearly as possible every day—the number, not merely of British merchant vessels sunk by mines and submarines, but also the arrivals of British vessels of over 100 tons net in United Kingdom ports, exclusive of fishing and local craft. I also propose to publish the number of British merchant vessels which are attacked and escape. I shall also publish the number of fishing vessels which are sunk."

He did not propose to publish the number of neutral and Allied vessels sunk. In the first place, "we have not always the accurate information, and, in the second place, the neutral and Allied Powers prefer to publish their own losses themselves. If they should be copied into our papers I do not mind, but I shall deal with our ships in the manner I have mentioned."

THE LOSSES THE ENEMY INCURS.

Sir Edward next dealt with the question of German losses. He said: "I am often asked, and my predecessors have often been asked, Why is it the Admiralty have not from time to time published the number of German submarines destroyed? It has been pointed out to me by many Members, and with considerable force, that the daily toll of British merchant shipping is published to the world, but nothing is said about the losses the enemy incurs in the submarine campaign, the effect being that all the honour appears to rest with the enemy, and that apparently nothing is being done on our part to cope with this menace." There was another side to the question:

> "*I have no doubt myself that the policy of silence pursued by successive Boards of the Admiralty about the losses of enemy submarines is the policy that the enemy dislikes most. Just see what it is. A submarine starts out on its campaign of murder and all the enemy know is that it does not return home. What has happened is a complete mystery to them. They cannot tell whether the submarine was lost from a defect of construction or design, which is a very important matter, or some error of navigation, or whether her loss was due to one or other of the methods that the British Admiralty has devised for her destruction.*"

The second point was that if the Admiralty were immediately to announce the certain destruction of an enemy submarine the enemy "would know without waiting that a relief for that particular boat was required and they would at once despatch another submarine, if available, to operate against our ships. I would rather leave them to imagine that they are there when they are not. As it is the enemy cannot know for some time the exact number of their submarines that have been operating at any particular moment."

BRITISH ENGAGEMENTS WITH U BOATS.

A further and the strongest argument was that the Admiralty did not know whether an enemy submarine had or had not for certain and in fact been destroyed. "All we know is that from day to day and from week to week reports come to us of engagements with enemy submarines, and it follows of necessity that the results range from the certain, through the probable, down to the possible and improbable. In the case of the submarine it is only absolutely certain when you have taken prisoners. After all, the submarine is operating mainly under the water. A submarine dives, and very often someone thinks that it has sunk. A submarine sometimes dives when it is wounded —no doubt never to come up again, but you cannot tell. I should be sorry to mislead the country by giving them only what you could call, under the circumstances I have mentioned, 'certainties.' I know it would be misleading. On the other hand, if I gave them probabilities it might be equally misleading. The degrees of evidence in relation to the sinking of every submarine, or the report of the sinking of every submarine, vary to the most enormous extent."

Sir Edward declared that he held in his hand brief accounts of some forty encounters which the British Fleet had with the submarine since February 1. "Recollect what they are doing, and how they are working. The fact that we have got into grips with them forty times in eighteen days is an enormous achievement." He gave a few illustrations to show the difficulty of establishing in the large majority of cases definite conclusions, taking his illustrations in the order of probability.

AN ABSOLUTE CASE.

The first illustration presented no difficulty whatsoever:

> *"A few days ago one of our destroyers attacked an enemy submarine. They hit the submarine, and, as events showed, killed the captain. The submarine dived. If she had remained below it would have been an uncertainty, but as a matter of fact she was injured only so much as that she was compelled, but able, to come to the surface. She was captured, and her officers and men were all taken prisoners. That is an absolute case. But look how different it might have been if the submarine had been so injured that she was unable to come to the surface and had remained at the bottom of the sea."*

His second illustration was that of a report received from a transport that she had struck an enemy submarine and was

herself damaged, and that she was confident that the submarine had been sunk. A further report was received later that an obstruction which was thought to be the sunk submarine had been located. "This is a claim of which we may say there attaches to it a degree of probability amounting to almost certainty. The injuries to the damaged ship were found to correspond to such injuries as would be cause d by ramming."

His third illustration was that of a report received that two patrol vessels had engaged two enemy submarines and sunk them both, but there were no casualties in the patrol boats and no survivors from the submarines. "A fuller report received of this engagement appears to show that one of the submarines was sunk, but it leaves a degree of doubt about the second."

His fourth illustration was that of one of the British destroyers reporting that she had heavily rammed an enemy submarine which was awash. There was no doubt that the destroyer struck the submarine a severe blow, but it was not possible to establish that the submarine was sunk. This, he thought, might be described as "a case of strong probability."

"POSSIBLE TO IMPROBABLE."

The fifth report was that of an enemy submarine being engaged by two patrol vessels, who were subsequently assisted by two destroyers. "The result of the engagement is reported as doubtful, although it is certain that one of the destroyers was slightly damaged in running over the conning-tower of the submarine. In another case one of our patrol vessels reported striking a submerged object after engaging an enemy submarine, and an examination of the patrol vessel bore out this report. It is believed that the submerged object struck was the submarine engaged, but it is not quite clear, and in this case there is a considerable degree of doubt."

He gave three more illustrations in which the claim was made, ranging from possible to improbable. A patrol vessel reported that she had been in action with an enemy submarine, that the fifth shot hit the submarine's conning-tower, and it was believed that she was sunk. The second case was that of a smaller airship sighting a submarine on the surface and dropping a bomb just after the submarine had dived. Lastly, there was a case in which an aeroplane dropped a bomb on the enemy submarine when in the act of diving. The submarine was not seen again, but the result was quite unknown.

"IT WILL BE SOLVED."

That was the situation. "I have neither tried to underestimate it nor to exaggerate it." He believed that the menace could be and would be beaten. It could only be solved by the nation itself acting in the ways he had indicated in conjunction with the Navy, "but," concluded the First Lord, "that it can be and will be solved is certain."

Printed in Great Britain by THE FIELD & QUEEN (HORACE COX) LTD.,
Bream's Buildings, London, E.C.